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Context and Implications Document for:

Impact of arts education on children's learning and wider outcomes

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Author's Introduction

There has been much furore over the marginalisation of arts in schools in the UK since the introduction of the English Baccalaureate (Ebacc). The Ebac excludes arts as one of the core subjects counted in the GCSE. Similarly, in the US the No Child Left Behind Act with its focus on maths, literacy and science has led to the devaluation of arts in schools. Concerns are now raised that these education reforms could stifle creativity and innovation.

Such concerns have led many in the UK to argue for arts to be given greater priority. The House of Lords, for example, argued for arts to be part of the core curriculum to encourage the development of creativity, critical thinking, motivation and self-confidence - skills necessary for innovation. Such skills are also believed to help children learn academic skills. Michael Leigh, the Oscar-award winning director, said it was ridiculous to think of arts as the preserve of the privileged, and that:

“Art should be a core subject of all subjects, like English is, but even more so.”

Many of these arguments have largely been instrumentalist presenting arts as having social and economic value. The question is whether there is evidence to support such arguments?

Funding bodies like the Education Endowment Foundation in the UK are now considering funding trials to test the benefits of arts education on young people's learning and other softer outcomes. This study examines the evidence for a range of arts activities from music training (instrumental), dancing, visual arts and drama to poetry and creative writing.

Implications for Policy

The findings of the study, based on a review of 200 studies, suggest that there is little evidence of the benefit of arts education in terms of academic attainment and development of other wider outcomes. This does not mean that participation in arts activities does not have such benefits, but rather that the evidence so far has been inconclusive. This is mainly because much of the research has been poor. A number of the studies had no counterfactuals so it is not possible to say if the children would have performed better if they had not participated in these arts activities. Many of

the studies were also small-scale, that is, fewer than 100 in each intervention arm (posing a threat to validity and reliability), did not involve random assignment and selection of participants and had no pre- and post-test comparisons. Findings were inconsistent across studies with some reporting positive effects and others negative effects. Studies that reported positive results were not replicated. Biased reporting is also common where authors report positive results and suppress negative ones. In a number of studies, the conclusions and headline findings do not match the data provided.

There is thus currently little support for the argument that encouraging arts participation could enhance learning and development of other social and personal skills. If raising attainment is the aim then arts education may not be the answer. Therefore, if arts education is to be encouraged in schools it should be for its own value.

However, despite the lack of conclusive evidence, the review has identified music training (playing an instrument) as having some promise. This could be trialled on a large-scale using robust evaluations to test its effects. This will be of relevance to potential funders and policy makers. There is also little research on the benefits of poetry and rhymes for very young children. There is potential for further research in this area. One important finding from this article is the large number of pseudo-research that makes little contribution to the overall evidence. If we genuinely want to know if participation in arts activities can contribute to the development of children's outcomes, then we should demand more robust and rigorous evaluations that use appropriate methods and analyses. Funders, policy makers and those commissioning research should demand that the research be of the highest quality. Journal editors and article reviewers should ensure that published work meet a minimum quality criteria. It is only ethical that we do so since policies are introduced, and taxpayers' money is spent on the back of such evidence.

Useful Links

1. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/413347/Music_in_schools_wider_still_and_wider.pdf
This is an Ofsted report that is based on evidence from 194 specialist music inspections and good practice visits in schools between 2008 and 2011. Case studies of good and weaker practice, included throughout the written report, are complemented by six specially commissioned films that further exemplify good practice in a wide range of school settings.
2. <https://www.musicalfutures.org/>
The Musical Futures initiative aims to transform music education through real-world learning. It embraces an ethos of innovative, inspirational and informal music learning in the classroom and in the community.
3. <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/funding/apply-funding/funding-programmes/harmony/>
In Harmony's mission is to transform the lives of children in deprived communities through ensemble music making.
4. <http://www.yde.org.uk/about>

Youth Dance England (YDE) is the national organisation that champions dance with and by children and young people. YDE will soon merge with three other long-standing dance organisations: Association of Dance of the African Diaspora, Dance UK and National Dance Teachers Association to form One Dance UK that will provide a joined up service to support dance practitioners.

5. <http://www.artsmark.org.uk/>
Artsmark award celebrates schools that champion the arts and strive for excellence in their provision. The award has been redesigned for the 2015/16 academic year to make it more relevant to the changing educational landscape. It seeks to help schools strike a balance in meeting EBACC and STEM priorities.
6. <http://www.nationaldrama.org.uk/>
National Drama has been the UK's leading subject association for Drama teachers and theatre educators for the last 25 years.